

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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LEGACY? WHAT LEGACY?

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I've been thinking a good bit lately about Bill Clinton's legacy as president, in sympathy with Bill's own reported concern with this issue, and in anticipation of the plethora of articles on the subject that are certain to begin to appear in the waning days of his stay in Washington.

As you, gentle reader, can well imagine, in a very short time I have compiled quite a colorful catalogue of initiatives for which Bill will most certainly be remembered by historians and common folk alike. Space doesn't permit me to enumerate all of them here, but a short list would most certainly contain the following names: Gennifer, Paula, Juanita, Monica, Kathleen, Dollie, Susan, Bobbie Ann, Elizabeth, Sally, and of course, Connie, the very same "Sweet, Sweet Connie, doing her act" that is highlighted in The Grand Funk Railroad's song, "We're An American Band."

But then I decided that none of these can accurately be called legacies. In fact, it occurred to me, after some reflection, that Bill will have no true legacy whatsoever, if by legacy one means something handed down, or bequeathed, to his successor that he himself created, formed, nurtured, and defended; if by legacy one means something that sprung from his personal convictions, view of the world, and the place of the United States within it; if by legacy, one means something akin to the following recent examples:

○ One of President Bush's legacies to Bill was a strong, proud, and victorious military, along with worldwide respect for this nation's judicious, decisive, and honorable use of this power in the Gulf War. President Bush made the decision to enter that war based on his own convictions and his own view of the world, and he assembled the coalition of nations that made an honorable victory possible by utilizing his personal diplomatic skills and energy.

○ One of President Reagan's many legacies to President Bush was victory in the Cold War, which he accomplished through his own determination, his unerring assessment of the weakness of the Russian communist state, and his conviction that it could be done. This conviction, it

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should be noted, was contrary to the views of a host of "experts" on the Soviet Union, including Bill's hapless Deputy Secretary of State, Strobe Talbott, who maintained as late as 1981 that "though some second-echelon hardliners in the Reagan Administration . . . espouse the early 1950s goal of rolling back Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, the U.S. simply does not have the military or political power to do that."

○ One of President Carter's legacies to President Reagan was the concept that consideration for human rights should be an integral part of American foreign policy. This initiative was President Carter's own, and was based on his strong religious convictions and personal decency.

For the life of me, I can come up with no significant Clinton initiative of this type; no action or policy that resulted directly from his personal beliefs, insight, or political courage. He only came close to such a thing twice, as far as I can tell. One was his quixotic military attempt to "restore" a democracy in Haiti that had never existed there in the first place. The other was when he approved Mrs. Clinton's attempt to pass a national health insurance scheme, which, of course, failed.

Indeed, I think one would be hard-pressed to find a president whose policies were dictated less by conviction and ideology and more by polls, external events, political expediency, and personal appetites. Even his choice of sex partners was, by all accounts, more often than not entirely opportunistic, made up as they appear to have been of women he met at political events, or who just happened to be in the vicinity when Mrs. Clinton wasn't paying attention.

All of this is particularly ironic in the case of Bill Clinton, I think, because if one believes the stories, almost from the day they met, Bill and Hillary decided to devote their lives to making him president some day, so that together they could permanently and radically change the power structure of American society.

Action was their demand. No more nice words. Things must change. The nation's poor, its minorities, and downtrodden must be enfranchised. The existing power structure must fall. And this must be done posthaste.

Mrs. Clinton set the tone in her quirky, but much-ballyhooed, 1969 commencement address at Wellesley, when she opened with a shrill, in-your-face response to then-Senator Edward Brooke's (R., Mass.) preceding speech. Brooke, the nation's only African-American Senator, a man of dignity and great symbolic importance at the time, wasn't strident enough for her, emphasizing, as he did, empathy for the plight of the disenfranchised, rather than radical action.

Deviating from her prepared text, Hillary Rodham began her speech by saying, "We're not in the positions yet of leadership and power, but we do have that indispensable task of criticizing and constructive protest and I find myself reacting just briefly to some of the things that Senator Brooke said." She had to be brief, she added, because she had "a little speech to give." She continued as follows.

Part of the problem with empathy, with professed goals, is that empathy doesn't do us anything. We've had lots of empathy; we've had lots of sympathy, but we feel that for too long our leaders have used politics as the art of the possible. And the challenge now

is to practice politics as the art of making what appears to be impossible, possible.

Twenty-three years later, little had changed. Screeds against "greed" were a hallmark of the first Clinton campaign. Radical "change" was promised in the form of a power shift away from the dreaded "establishment" and its corporate co-conspirators and toward the "average American," whom the Clintons claimed was being "left behind."

Needless to say, such a power shift is not one of Bill's legacies. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that few presidents have ever more aggressively sought the company and approval of the nation's rich and powerful than Bill.

In fact, irony of ironies, when the day comes for him to discuss his legacy publicly, it is almost certain that he will claim that two of his most important ones are welfare reform, which reduced federal transfer payments to poor Americans, and unprecedented prosperity, which made the traditional American establishment more powerful than it has ever been and rich beyond dreams of avarice, to borrow a phrase from the 18th-century playwright Edward Moore and popularized by Russell Kirk.

Of course, Bill, in my opinion, did little if anything personally that would allow him to claim either welfare reform or prosperity as a legacy of his own. He originally opposed welfare reform, but jumped on the bandwagon when it was clear that it would reach its destination with or without his direction. And to the degree that anything political happened on Bill's watch that had anything positive to do with the economic prosperity of the past decade, it was, I believe, that the Republicans gained control of both the House and the Senate in the 1994, which kept radical, left-wing Democrats, who would have chaired the key committees in both bodies, from doing anything stupid to derail it.

Now I know that many Clinton critics will argue that his principal legacy is widening corruption, a growing disrespect for conventional morals and values, a dramatically weaker and demoralized military, and diminished regard for U.S. leadership around the world.

I understand this position. In fact, I have argued it myself in the past. But, on reflection, as I said earlier, it is not clear to me that any of these circumstances are of Bill's own making, that he personally "willed" any of them in a Nietzschean sense. Each occurred on his watch, of course. But he had lots of help, not just from his own party, but from the American public, and from Republicans, who collectively played the role of the dog that didn't bark.

I think these things are, more than anything else, legacies of the 1960s, just as Bill himself is. They call to my mind, as I have said several times in these pages, Kipling's great short story, *The Mother Hive*, in which the wax moth invades and destroys the hive and the farmer tells his son, "Wax moth only succeed when weak bees let them in . . . that never happens till the stock's weakened." When viewed from this perspective, I think it is accurate to say that a President Clinton couldn't have happened had the American stock not been weakened.

The saving grace in all of this is that Bill, the man whom Hillary chose to help her "make the world a better place," via a socialist blueprint, turned out to be fundamentally unsuited for the job of radical revolutionary.

Now, I will grant you that Bill is, without doubt, a remarkable politician, perfectly suited for his time. He is charismatic, intelligent, glib, a great communicator. He is, I believe it is safe to say, ruthless when it comes to dealing with those whom he considers his enemies. He is an excellent liar, as Nebraska Senator Kerry (D.) once pointed out. And he is, by all appearances, unburdened by a conscience, ethical or moral considerations, promises, convictions, a sense of personal responsibility, or a strong commitment to friends who get in trouble on his behalf. In short he has a multitude of the characteristics of a great leftist revolutionary leader.

But, unfortunately for Mrs. Clinton and, in my opinion, fortunately for the rest of the nation, he has little of the determination and courage it would take to truly shake the American power structure to its roots. Ironically, I believe, he is full of the empathy that Mrs. Clinton so disdained in Senator Brooke. He "feels everyone's pain," but isn't all that interested in feeling any significant pain, or even temporary discomfort, himself on their behalf.

As virtually all the many books about him and his presidency have pointed out, he is basically a creature of his appetites. He recalls, for me at least, biographer Donald McCormick's famous description of Lloyd George, "hot as a leek and amorous as a goat." But more than anything, by all accounts, from friends and enemies alike, the driving force in Bill's life is that he desperately wants to be liked, which is not a trait that makes for a good radical revolutionary leader.

Bismarck, reflecting on Montaigne's choice of the words *peut-etre* (perhaps) for his epitaph, said he would like *nous verrons* (we will see) for his. Bill, in the same vein, might, I believe, choose a plaintive *aimez-moi* (love me).

As one might expect, Bill has an alternative theory for why he hasn't been able to achieve a truly great legacy, in a history book sense. Reportedly, in his opinion, the times have been too placid. No big economic or military crisis presented itself for resolution by a courageous, determined, and intelligent president, which he most certainly is and would have demonstrated had history given him the chance to do so.

There is, of course, some truth to the placid-period part of this argument. Peace and prosperity do, in fact, take their toll on would-be heroes. But, in my opinion, if one is looking for an explanation for Bill's lack of a legacy that is strictly related to the times in which he served, I think it would be more accurate to say that the problem was not placidity, but tumultuousness.

Yes, there was peace. Yes, there was prosperity. But history will also record, I believe, that the eight years Bill served in Washington was one of the most extraordinary, almost unbelievable, periods of change in the history of the nation, driven by, among other things, the coming of age of the baby boomers; the end of the Cold War; globalization of trade and finance; fantastic advances in technology; the communications revolution, including the Internet; and the triumph of mass democracy.

Such a period would have, I believe, been a wonderful opportunity to create a lasting and important legacy for a president with the energy and intelligence to guide and direct these forces in a positive way.

The three legacies mentioned above of Presidents Bush, Reagan, and Carter could, I believe,

have been built upon in this period of abounding change to create a nation that was in fact a stabilizing force, morally, economically, and militarily, in a world that desperately needed such an entity.

But it didn't happen. Not only was Bill not up to the challenge, he was overwhelmed by it. Instead, on Bill's watch, corruption flourished, moral and ethical decay accelerated, and respect abroad for America's moral leadership virtually evaporated in the presence of a "For Sale" sign at the Clinton White House and a series of hapless military ventures launched against small nations for what appeared to be no other purpose than drawing public attention away from Bill's libido-driven public relations problems.

Just as importantly, and once again, ironically, the nation's giant corporations, so despised by Mrs. Clinton in her salad years, became even more powerful during her husband's stay in the White House, as they bought influence and joined forces with the giant government leviathan that she and her fellow liberals created.

This isn't, in my opinion, a legacy, for the reasons described above. Instead, it is, I think, a great tragedy.

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